



## Chapter 9

*Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them; and I will reveal to them an abundance of peace and truth. Jeremiah 33:6*

*I thought the Master Sculptor had finished chiseling for a while and that my soul was starting to take shape, but this was not the case. I still had a great deal to learn about the God of Love, and He literally stopped me in my tracks to teach the greatest lessons of all...*

## **Mama Mia!**

As I stated at the very start, the largest hurdle that kept me from the Catholic Church was the culture and doctrine pertaining to Mary. But thankfully, when she so humbly appeared to me and told me, “Don’t let issues you have with me keep you from my Son,” it seemed as if the logjam in my heart cleared, and my resistance toward her melted away. She no longer seemed threatening. As a matter of fact, I now considered her an ally. I had a “friend on the inside.” After all, when my pride and misunderstanding kept me from Mary, she came to me. She sought me out humbly, tenderly, and authoritatively. The Lord had so beautifully softened my heart that I was now able to view her with eyes of love, not judgment.

During the Advent season leading up to my Confirmation, I was given a book called *The Reed of God* by Caryll Houselander. I had been reading snippets of her work in the *Magnificat* and was captivated by her writings. She was a true artist. This book was about the Blessed Mother and how we are to emulate her. I was fascinated.

Houselander’s work became my soul’s companion. She stated that we must have “Emptiness... That virginal quality...it is not a formless emptiness, a void without meaning; on the contrary it

has a shape, a form given to it by the purpose for which it is intended...like the hollow in a reed, the narrow riftless emptiness, which can have only one destiny: to receive the piper's breath and to utter the song that is in His heart.

It is emptiness like the hollow in the cup, shaped to receive water or wine.

It is emptiness like that of the bird's nest, built in a round warm ring to receive the little bird...

(Our Lady) was indeed like those three things.

She was a reed through which the Eternal Love was to be piped as a shepherd's song.

She was the flowerlike chalice into which the purest water of humanity was to be poured, mingled with wine, changed to the crimson blood of love, and lifted up in sacrifice.

She was the warm nest rounded to the shape of humanity to receive the Divine Little Bird." 9

I was in love. I wanted to have this "emptiness." I wanted to be like Mary and make room in my life to be absolutely filled with Him.

The Lord put a longing into my heart to grow more deeply spiritual and so I felt determined to emulate Jesus and the Virgin Mary, following them all the way from Jesus' birth to His death. I would take this next year to read the Gospels, grasping Mary's hand with my one hand and Jesus' with my other. They would be my companions to show me new spiritual truths through their eyes.

It had become my practice since meeting with Fr. Michael to go daily to the Adoration Chapel. There, I would sit, read, and pray. One of the prayers I loved to lift to the Lord was the *Te Deum* printed in the back of the *Magnificat*. The funny thing was, month after month, I had underlined the same line, over and over again, and I was really not sure why. The line states:

“When you became man to set us free you did not spurn the Virgin’s womb.”

As I sat in the Adoration Chapel one day and prayed and offered my desire to the Lord to grow in holiness by accompanying Him from birth to death and back again, I distinctly heard these words...

“Not from My BIRTH to My death but from My CONCEPTION to My death.”

Huh? That was funny. “What could that mean?” I thought.

That evening, in my home, after cleaning up the dishes from dinner and getting my little one to bed, I sat down for a rare moment of evening quiet. I just happened to pick up a coffee table book called, *Splendors of The Magnificat*. [10] I opened to the introduction and there I read:

“The Magnificat belongs on the lips of all those who have been begotten from above by the power of the Holy Spirit and *in the waters of Mary’s womb—a place that the saints identify as the locale where one is formed into the divine image of Mary’s Son.*”

Wow! In the Adoration Chapel I was told to emulate Him from conception to death, and now I had read this! I so longed to follow Jesus and His blessed Mother, but I had not even been aware of such a thought until this moment. (He) “did not spurn the Virgin’s womb...”

But would I? Was I willing to make Mary my true mother, not my adopted mother, but my *real spiritual mother*? In order to do that, she would need to “give me birth.”

After pondering and praying, I felt that, in this Advent season, I would go to the Adoration Chapel and prayerfully picture myself in Mary’s womb with Jesus. I would picture us as twins! I tried to imagine what it must have been like for Him to leave the splendor of Heaven and to be confined in such a little space. The God who *created all* was now *being created*! He not only looked and acted like His heavenly Father (He is the exact representation of His nature [Hebrews 1:3]), but was taking on human flesh, Mary’s flesh, and would resemble His mother as well.

It was so sweet, and again, so humbling. Day after day, baby Jesus and I would just happily sit peacefully in Mary’s womb together and she would sing and talk sweetly to us—just like I did to my babies when they were in my womb.

I emptied myself out and was being rebuilt in the womb of her love. I have never felt so loved, nurtured, and cared for. She was teaching me a new way of being kind and of self-giving. I was being enfleshed by her, to look like her...and like Him.

And then on Christmas, we were born! And at last, Mary was my Mother—my real mother—not my adopted mother, but my *real* mother. And best of all, I was hers.

It was like in John 19:26... Jesus was saying to me, “Behold, your mother!”

You see, I have such a wonderful earthly mother; I never knew I needed a perfect spiritual mother. But just as I had a wonderful earthly father, I still need and needed a relationship with my Perfect Heavenly Father. God gives us all we need in the heavenly realm so that, when things fall short, as they inevitably do since none of us are perfect in the earthly realm, we can still be totally at peace.

Fast-forward into the new year. Within a few weeks, I became a Catholic. I was in a state of euphoria! I now had Jesus in the Eucharist, all of the sacraments, Mary as my mother, and all of the saints of heaven to pray with me and for me. I had Shalom! Earthly life was, in my opinion, as good as it gets... for about a week.

Life is neither “all great,” nor “all horrible,” and it seemed in these days to be a combination of both, simultaneously. Joys and sorrows are like railroad tracks that run parallel, at least in my life. I decide which track to gaze upon. If I gaze only upon the sorrows and sufferings that come my way, I get bogged down and “jump the track” so to speak. If I choose to look at Jesus, count my blessings, see the joy and the good things He brings alongside, even out of the sufferings, and constantly praise Him (“singing my way through life”), the journey is far smoother.

And so...shortly after my joyous entrance into the Church, we learned some very sobering news. My husband’s darling sister who had Down syndrome and lived with us on and off throughout the year was diagnosed with a very aggressive form of melanoma. Cecilia came to stay in our home permanently and before too very long hospice care was needed. I now got to put into

practice all I had been experiencing from the Blessed Virgin: kindness, patience, gentleness, and self-giving.

It was horrifying to see Cecilia in so much pain. Her cancer was not only internal, but had also spread over the surface of her poor little body. It was as though her skin was blooming melanoma blossoms, it was heartbreaking beyond all telling, almost beyond description. I cannot truly express what it was like. The tumors were in various stages and sizes—some as big as my hand. We had to clean and dress them often so that they would not get infected. It was almost more than I could bare to even look at them. She would cry and ask us for help. Her mental age was about that of an eight-year-old...it was like seeing and not being able to rescue a suffering child.

I am very squeamish by nature but I felt that the Lord and His beautiful compassionate mother enabled me to do things I could never have done alone. I pictured Cecilia as Christ lying there, and me as Mary, bathing her wounds. My dear husband was a rock. He never flinched. He so tenderly did all that was required each day. And the hospice workers who would come to check on her could not have been more kind and loving. God sent what we needed just when we needed it.

Cecilia passed very quickly, within only a few months, leaving a huge hole in our lives. She had taught us so much over the span of her lifetime about laughter and joy even in the midst of

unkindness or deep suffering. She embodied the true beauty of a very child-like faith and unconditional love.

After her death, our lives went on, but it was a very difficult time. I was so thankful for all that the Church and my faith had brought to me—the disciplines Fr. Michael had instilled in me—daily Mass, Adoration, journaling, and exercise, all of which helped greatly to ease the loss of Cecilia. Those were now the “other rail” I focused on to keep me chugging along.

Before too long, led by God’s grace and accompanied by an amazing group of fellow Catholic women, I felt inspired to begin a chapter of a Catholic women’s Bible study called *Walking with Purpose* in my home parish. Margarita, Linda, and I were introduced to the program’s founder, Lisa Brenninkmeyer, and God began to bless our efforts. Very quickly, the program grew out of that original study in my home parish to other parishes in our area, reaching hundreds of women. It seemed to me like life was finally getting back to normal.

But, once again, out of the blue, tragedy struck. Within a year, I myself would have an accident, experience a traumatic head injury, concussion, and spinal injury that alerted us to a pre-existing brain condition called a chiari malformation. The accident, combined with the chiari, caused me to be temporarily paralyzed, lose a great deal of both my short-term memory capability and the long-term fullness of mobility on my left side, and to experience paralyzing back and headaches. I had to lay flat in a darkened room with sunglasses, earplugs, and a neck brace for nearly three months. Never before had I experienced such trauma or needed Mother Mary like I did during that episode.



I had wonderful friends who ministered to me like angels. Linda brought me the Eucharist daily; it became my Oxygen and my Glue—it kept me whole. I had felt a bit like an egg which had been cracked open. The Eucharist and prayer were the means the Lord chose to hold me together and mend my poor fractured shell. Heidi organized prayer times and Kathryn arranged for meals for my family. I never could have made it without the Body of Christ, these friends were truly His hands and feet. I felt His love through each one.

Three different life-changing questions became a part of my healing process:

1. Fr. Michael Gilmary, a Maronite Monk, asked: “*Are you suffering well?*” I never knew that I could! But this became my goal! “Offer it up!” and “The only tragedy in suffering is wasted suffering!” became my mottos. I united my sufferings to Christ’s as a prayer for every intention He placed on my heart. I did not want my suffering to be wasted—not one minute of it.

2. I had heard a beautiful homily given while I had been caring for Cecilia. The priest had told the story of a tribe of Native Americans who instructed their young boys and girls, as part of an adult initiation rite, to “Look and see the hardships of our life and how we suffer. Until you learn to suffer, you will always be a little child in an adult’s body.” I felt as though I was learning how to suffer, and suffer “well.” It was a great means of spiritual maturation for me. I often asked myself, “*What am I learning from this?*” so as not to miss “the good parts” God had in store for me through the ordeal.

3. Jane, a longtime friend offered: *“Ask God, ‘What do You want to be to me in this situation that You could be to me in no other?’”* And so I did... He wanted to be my *“Everything,”* my *“Completer”* when I felt very *“incomplete.”* Instead of looking at all I was unable to do and getting discouraged by it, I tried to see everything as a love note from God. I tried to look to see how He would *“do it”* in order to *“complete me.”* He usually cared for me through friends or family, or sometimes would just give me the consolation of being able to be okay without it.

He, of course, had also given me her, the Blessed Virgin, my Mother. And there would be times that I would cry out to God and to Mary in pain, and I could literally feel her mantle of love wrap around me to bring me great comfort.

I was invited to apply to go to Lourdes, France, with the Order of Malta. The Blessed Mother appeared there in the 1850s and left waters that have become a site for pilgrims seeking healing. At the time I was so weak and woozy that I could not even think about going. After many months, when I was finally beginning to be able to walk a straight line again when the trip was only one week from departure, by God’s grace, and I am sure, as a result of much prayer by friends, family and gifted prayer ministers I felt strong enough to make the journey.

Miraculously a spot opened up, and off I went.

On our first day at Lourdes, we entered the baths, and I was, quite frankly, overwhelmed, freezing, and scared to death. I could sense in my spirit that it was a very powerful place, but for

many reasons, when I entered the frigid water, I was not prepared for what would take place next. As I stepped down into the icy waters, I suddenly felt an influx of heat down my back and on my left side. Something miraculous was happening. I felt I was being healed but I was so fearful that I asked “what ever it was” to *stop* until I could understand better all that was taking place... and so... it did. I was then asked by the assistants there if I wanted to kiss the statue of the Blessed Virgin that was placed at the end of the bath. I said, emphatically, “NO!” All I wanted was to get dressed and get out of there!

My lower back was now pain free and I could feel, for the first time in what seemed forever, in perfect alignment. My headache was gone, too. It was a marvelous feeling after months of pain. But my left leg was still as weak as it had been before. I got back to the hotel and was quite shaken. I was searching for a lifeline so I called a couple who were long-time friends—my spiritual mentors. They happened to be Protestants involved in a healing ministry, and had taught me a great deal over the years. I told them where I was and what had happened... and, once again, God was *full of surprises!* I did not expect to hear what they had to say.

Their best advice to me was to go back to the baths and try again! They told me that the enemy *hates* the Virgin Mary. In Genesis 3:15 it states that she was prophesied to crush the head of the serpent, and in the book of Revelation Chapter 12 the devil is portrayed as the dragon who tried to devour her and her Child Jesus, but Mary was victorious in the end! So this time, they counseled, I was to ask the Virgin to *simply step on the head of anything inside of me that was*

*not from God!* Gulp! The last thing I wanted to do was to go back into that water! I dreaded it for the rest of the trip.

On the last day we were given a chance to go again. I went with fear and trembling—literally! But this time, it was an entirely different scenario. I ended up accompanying a friend's child, so we were put into the children's section. (Unless you become like little children... Mt. 18:3) I once again felt the nurturing care of the Blessed Mother. This time, instead of wanting physical healing when I stepped into the water, I simply stated, "I want you to crush whatever is not of God inside of me and I want whatever YOU want!" And when I put one foot in, my entire life began to flash before my eyes, and I saw all of the injustices and indignities that I had experienced as a child and growing up.

I had a sort of "righteous anger" burning in me all of my life, but I never exactly knew its source, and at last, here it was—I could see it. And when I did see it, I saw something so amazing happen to it! The beautiful and powerful foot of the blessed Mother came crashing down on the head of the serpent and **KILLED IT** and then **RELEASE!** It was gone! Miraculously all of this pent up fury and frustration was gone! I had peace and joy like I had never had before! I had a powerful and capable Mother, and I did not even know I needed her! She conquered what I could not, to set me free to love.

This inner healing I experienced was so much more essential than the physical healing I initially pursued. Praise be to God, as the years have passed, I have experienced a great deal of additional

physical healing due to God's grace through prayer and my wonderful physical therapists Joe and Michael who helped keep me upright and moving. God uses all types of healing methods in our lives, but God knew what I needed at the time, and He brought it to me through the loving hand (or foot!) of the Blessed Virgin.

And this time, when they asked me if I would like to kiss the Virgin statue at the foot of the bath, I said, "YES!" and I gave her a huge kiss! My wonderful, humble, kind, conquering, and powerful Mother! My heavenly Mother of whom I had been so ignorant.

I now know that we have the *perfect heavenly family*, and if we are cooperative and allow all the goodness that is them to flow through us, God allows us to give adequate grace to all of those who are less than perfect here on earth, because we don't *need* them to be perfect. They can be human, *just as we are human*, and we can forgive each other's trespasses and failures and inadequacies.

God has given us all we need to make it through this life victoriously. We need only give ourselves to Him with confident abandonment, and then look with great surprised delight at His handiwork in and through our lives. He has many means to accomplish His great work.

**Praise:** Bless you, Lord of life. "Not from My BIRTH to My death, but from My CONCEPTION to My death."

**Prayer:** Lord, please give me the grace to be willing to be formed by the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, just as Jesus was, so that I can be like Him and like her in all ways. Mother Mary, please crush the head of anything in me that is not of God the Father. Please untie all the knots of my past sins and the sins of others that entangle and enrage me. I want to have more fully the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Please grant me the fortitude I need to press heavenward, as maturation is a process, sometimes even a struggle, and it can take a lifetime! Grant me patience with myself. Amen.

**Promise:** “I will put enmities between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring. She will crush your head, and you will lie in wait for her heel.” Gen 3:15

**Proof of the Promise:** I have learned that Mary is our humble, gentle, but also powerful and capable mother. She is able to crush the head of the serpent of all that is in us that is not of the Father. I need only to ask her to do it. For more about Mary’s ability to “mother us” through every trial, see Appendix 2.

**Ponder: Journal here** about any knots that the Blessed Mother may need to undo, anything that keeps you from living a life of true freedom. Perhaps take a look at your “sufferings” and see if you are “suffering well” and offer them up to our Loving Lord so that you may be more united to Him in His suffering. Finally, ask the Lord to show you what He wants to be to you now, right

where you are, that He could be to you in no other time or place due to your circumstances, and speak to Him about this...